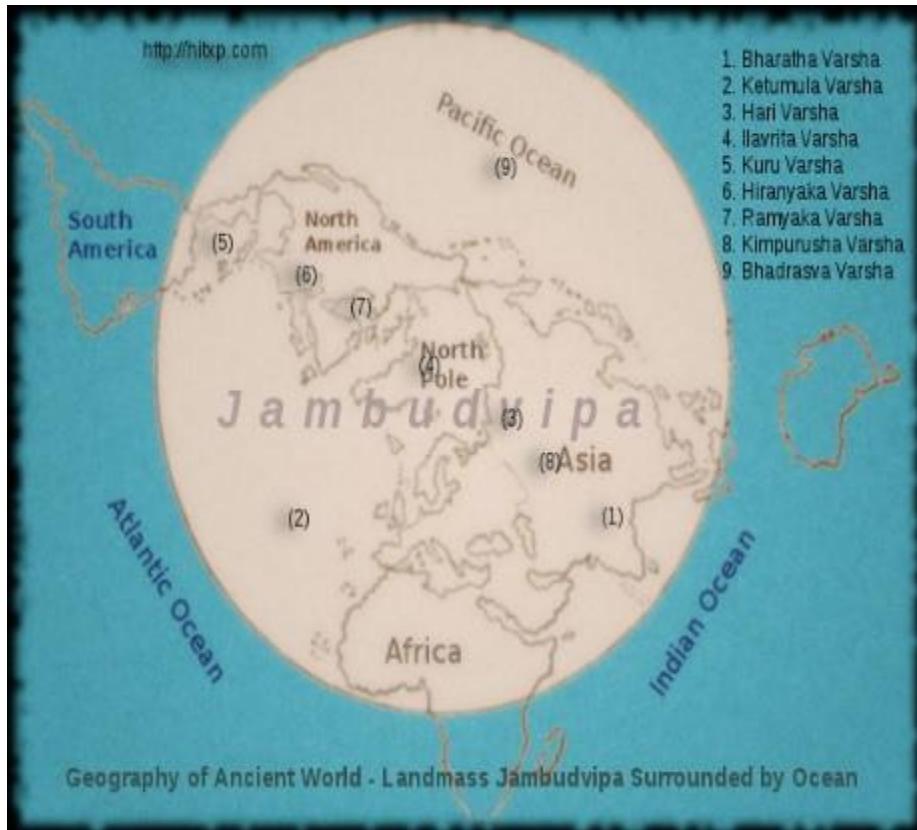


Imagining Jambudvipa: Rescuing Indology and Indian History



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The Problematised and Their Alternatives

The field of social science research experienced a catharsis during the twentieth century that catalyzed Indological Studies and embroiled scholars in deeply divisive theoretical debates. Post-modernism, critical-theory and other dynamic approaches have problematised basic assumptions and standard methodologies of research and analysis. This paper is an attempt to deconstruct one fragment of the contemporary post-Orientalist deconstructive analyses of India, and with this effort, hopefully some of the excesses, clichés and unsatisfactoriness of the discourses will themselves be problematised. This paper also attempts to serve as a tentative vehicle for the voice of the contemporary Hindu intellectuals, whose understandings straddle a post-traditional,

pluralistic cultural nationalism and a post-modern, globalizing internationalism. The trend in Western academia is to deny agency to the politically active revivalist Hindus while proffering analyses and offering conclusions about contemporary Indo-centric groups, who are deconstructed, dissected, and demonized, yet very rarely invited to speak. Their views are seldom aired dispassionately.

To counter this void of agency allowed to the modern Indian subject who, by the way, is also a twenty-first century scholar, I have included several lengthy excerpts from an interview with Ramani Srivnivasan, a native of Chennai and PhD from the University of Pennsylvania. This paper also contains a section that employs the categories developed by Gerald Larson, in his book, *India's Agony Over Religion* for conceptualizing India, and expands on his

themes. Primarily, this paper is designed to suggest possible alternative academic approaches to problematize the study of “Hindu Identity” in the ancient Indian context, and to hopefully open theoretical space for a more sympathetic reading of the tangible historical expressions of Sanatana Dharma in ancient Jambudivpa, or what has come to be called “Hinduism” in ancient “India”.

Academic Angst, Oxymoronic Theories, and Social Agendas

Dramatically dense, meta-theoretical academic discourse dominated the social sciences in the last half of the last century. These post-modern theoretical approaches were solidly corrective early on, metamorphosing the field. Nonetheless, in this reading, these methodologies have gone full circle and now are used to perpetuate the

very hegemonic, assumptive perspectives and methodologies that they were initially attempting to reject through deconstructing and fragmenting the dominant narrative. Pointing out the inadequacy of one of the commonly argued constructs—that there was no “Hindu identity” in pre-Islamic/pre-British India and therefore no geographical or “national” concept of a Hindu identity—offers an example of these excesses. I can only humbly attempt to initiate this discussion, because I am not a Sanskritist or classical Indologist. I am simply a student of India presenting some of the paradigms that restrict understanding with the hope that this preliminary discussion will encourage further dialogue. In so doing, and with all due respect, perhaps it can partially take apart a few of the shared assumptions of the theoretical constructs that have, with

dexterous intellectual aplomb, taken India apart during the last few decades.

Certainly meta-theoretical models have made Indology a fascinating and fertile field. The post-Orientalist paradigm has been employed not only to decenter colonial constructions of knowledge and the relationship of knowledge and power, but to problematize indigenous models of “pre-Orientalism” in “pre-Islamic/pre-British India.” There are, however, some ironic contradictions in the post-Orientalist debate. The very agency promised by this project is shunned by the social agendas inherent in the new ideological constructs and denied even more fully in the final, or rather, continuing analyses. Do lingering “colonial constructs” still form the intellectual bedrock of many scholars who, during the prolific academic surge of the eighties and nineties in the wake of Edward Saidism,

claimed to have gone beyond Orientalism? Or did they publicly face their own angst and then quietly return to their cherished positions about India, with some new twist of verbiage?

What is now happening, can be compared to a fractal image. Much like the child on the back cover of the Amar Chitra Katha comic book who is looking at a picture of himself on the back cover of the comic book looking at himself looking at a comic book, and so on, infinitely. Quite often when scholars look at India they are seeing themselves looking at India, looking at India, looking at India. But India is not being seen. Their analyses are a reflection of their negation of what India is/was not. In order to avoid anything that remotely resembles essentialism, relationships are fragmented, decentered, and dislodged. Yet, these decontextualized fragments exist in

relationship to one or more of the many mosaics that create “Indic civilization.”

On one end of the intellectual spectrum are culturally relativistic models that do not accept causal explanations or conventional social science theorizing. If applied in the extreme, this meta-theoretical approach can create an overly reflexive paralyzing angst, an inability to recognize any relationships. At the other end are rational utility models that attempt to uncover coherent structure in chaos and chart function and predictability. Whichever position the researcher takes on the qualitative/quantitative continuum, in the field of socio-historical research any attempt at understanding is simultaneously influenced by the subject and by the orientation of the scholar. From any angle, historical research is a continuous activity of co-construction—even the most pedantic of the positivists experience this process. In

today's theory driven analyses of the human sphere, scholarly subjectivities are owned and examined along with the object, yet, no matter how out-front, they are nonetheless operational.

Such milestone tomes as Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1984) and the work of the Subaltern group have profoundly influenced the ways that social scientists think about India. This deeply theoretical catharsis, which is the modern expression of a longer process of European historiography, has revolutionized Indological studies.

The importance of understanding the development of Indology is made apparent by Inden's articulate statement,

Euro-American Selves and Indian Others have not simply interacted as entities that remain fundamentally the same. They have

dialectically constituted one another. Once one realizes the truth of this, he or she will begin to see that India has played a part in the making of nineteenth and twentieth-century Europe (and America) much greater than the “we” of scholarship, journalism, and officialdom would normally wish to allow. The subcontinent was not simply a source of colonial riches or a stage-setting in which Western hunters could stalk tigers, the sons of British merchants and aristocrats could make a financial killing, or the spiritualist find his or her innermost soul (or its Buddhist absence). More than that, India was (and to some extent still is) the object of thoughts and acts with which this ‘we’ has constituted itself.

Most modern scholars, including subaltern, Marxist, secular and even Hindu-nationalists (or Vedic-centric), often reject as inadequate, terms such as “religion” or

“Hinduism” or “civilization,” but then proceed to employ them as known variables in their analyses. Within a single argument a scholar may insist that there was no “Hindu identity” in pre-Islamic India and in the same statement employ the category of “Hindu” as a given concept. In *Communalism and Ancient Indian History*, Romila Thapar states: “The recognizable Hindu begins to emerge in the post-Gupta period in the post fifth century A.D.” In the next sentence she proposes that, “There is ample evidence from the sources of the ancient period to suggest that religious sects and groups in pre-Islamic India did not identify themselves as Hindu and as a unified religion.” Thapar questions “the terminology which the Hindus used to distinguish themselves from the Muslims.” (emphasis mine) She concludes,

Separate religious identification emerges only after the establishment of Turkish political power in the subcontinent. It is precisely the nature of the organization of Hinduism (emphasis mine), which precluded its giving a purely religious identity to the followers of other religions.

This version of the historical narrative is designed to negate the claims of the “ancientness school” of Indian historiography. This treatment was codified in Romila Thapar’s 1969 essay and further developed years later by Cynthia Talbot whose 1995 essay elevated this argument to a more elaborate and critical form. This approach rejects research that seeks to stress strands of commonality as studied by the “ancientness school”. It is the approach commonly accepted as “scientific” by scholars associated with Departments of Asian Studies.

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Conversely, buried not too deeply within such arguments are the flipsides of the same debates. There is a contradiction inherent in the claim that the pluralistic, tolerant, non-dogmatic nature of the as-of-yet-unnamed-Hindu religion “precluded its giving a purely religious identity [vis-à-vis] other religions”. This assumes that there was a particular way of thinking and acting among the many indigenous peoples living in the Indian Subcontinent 3000 to 1000 years ago. Such assumptions inherently point to elements and concepts that tie the philosophies of these ancient peoples together in one way or

another—in processes interacting and overlapping in innumerable combinations and variations. These groups referred to as the indigenous Indians, who were not-yet-named-Hindu, are also known as early followers of Sanatana Dharma. This far-flung eclectic Dharmic group inhabited the lands that included present day Afghanistan, across the Himalayas and were quite literally scattered all over peninsular India.

The inherent paradox suggested by this argument gives rise to many questions: At what point did this civilizational organization of the groups-not-yet-know-as-Hindus mutually recognized each other? How did early “proto” Hindus in one region of ancient India conceive their relationships to those in other areas, and to the broader geography of the Subcontinent? If applied “against the text” of popular post-modern renderings of this issue, can examples from

archeology, art, folklore, literature, and other disciplines point to what could be identified as a generally understood and fairly pervasive recognition of the multiple mutualities, and the confluences between cultural mutations that existed across time among of the many traditions spread across what is now known as South Asia? These commonalities include shared social organizing principals practiced over wide-ranging regions, and common cultural themes shared by many if not most of the peoples residing in the area that was often referred to as Bharatvarsha, the “Land of the Bharats”... Jambudvip.

The varied cultures of the Indian Subcontinent have shared, through the centuries, numerous basic perceptions of ontology based on particular concepts of time and space, employing a multitude of symbols with common meanings that might

or might not overlap with any other. Some examples include respect for the cow and/or bull, centrality of fire worship and/or rituals, symbolism of the earth and the other planets, the ubiquitousness of many iconographic and artistic forms such as the swastika, the lingam, the lotus, the chakra or wheel.

Deification of the female, sacredness of rivers and certain species of trees, medicinal remedies, common styles of jewelry, ornaments, fabrics and elements of fashion, are found in many geographically distant locations in India, among a broad assortment of peoples – of all castes and classes, with different ishta devas, and different languages, and distinct cultural identities.

Quite often there are similarities in birth and death rituals and importantly, a treasury of shared myths. A cursory, open-minded look at such variables could serve to counter the theory that Hindus were unaware of their

cultural connections and oblivious of a certain trans-Subcontinental civilizational syncretism or inter-relatedness until, it was inscribed upon them by outsiders such as the “Turkish other”.

The Hindu Other Confronts an Occi-centric Academia

The use and some would say misuse of Occi-centric terminology or the “imperialism of categories” presupposes post-Enlightenment rational-modernist shared concepts and imposes these on the multi-valenced, “post-traditional” Indian socio-political-religious “homogenously heterogeneous” experience. Such terms as “nationalism,” “secularism,” “religion,” “religious identity,” “community,” “community identity,” are simultaneously deconstructed and discarded by

modern/post-modern techniques and then, ironically subsequently reappropriated in validation of their exegeses. Trapped as we are when using any languages by the culturally specific analogs of generally understood terms like “religion,” we must recognize the chameleon-like nature of their inexact usages, and be flexible and guarded in their application. There is validity in the basic assumption of post-modernists that heuristic conventions are relative and difficult to translate within specific cultural contexts and should not, cannot be frozen or generalized.

Many Occi-centric theories applied to historiography lead directly to the discourse that denies commonalities of religious experience in pre-Islamic India. It is argued that Indian Nationalists, and in the continuing discourse, “Hindu Nationalists,” appropriated the Orientalist paradigm and

reified essences from the “Golden Age” of India’s past in the construction of their own contemporary identity. This allegation is premised on the theory that there was no Hinduism, as we know it, in ancient (pre-modern) or early medieval (pre-Islamic) India.

The theory begins with the word ‘Hind’ that was a corruption of “Sindh,” and was used by those outside India—Greeks, Persians, Arabs—to refer to those residing in the Subcontinent, the region in the general proximity and to the east of the Indus or Sindhu River. This etymological factoid is used to assert that there were no “Hindus” as such, because if those unnamed people living inside India did not share a common name, it infers that they did not see themselves as having coterminous religious constructs. This strategy depends on the practice of labeling groups according to

organically understood contemporary conventions that did not exist two thousand years ago.

The theory argues that “Brahmanism” was the hegemonic discourse that brought Sanskrit to the ubiquitous position it attained very early in the Subcontinent. But, according to this analysis, was it only an elite phenomenon and the masses remained unaffected by the dharmic discourse of the “Great Tradition”—at least on a personal, “spiritual” level. Hinduism-as-we-know-it, the theory continues, did not develop until the Islamic interface had been solidified after the 1400’s. In such a South Asian milieu of culturally isolated, socially disconnected, and geographically divided communities, Bhakti “cults” and other religious movements would have been unaware of their counterparts in other parts of the country. Yet there is sufficient

evidence, even from a superficial examination of the most obvious cases, that there has long been an awareness of a commonality of myths, motifs, and beliefs stretching from the Himalayas to the Indian Ocean to the Bay of Bengal to Sri Lanka.

The Occi-centric post-modern analysis breaks the “religions” of India into “Brahmanism” (called the “Brahmanism” trope), then the much later evolution or emergence of the “Hinduism trope”, often conceived as a religious way of life patched together from a disjointed collection of far-flung and fragmented communities.

Hinduism-as-we-know-it was therefore created first by Muslim invaders who catalyzed an entire civilization to recognize itself, and then codified by colonialists who grouped Indians into religious categories in order to facilitate a divide and rule strategy. This is the source methodology of the

academic reconstruction of the origins of Hinduism.

In response to this interpretation, questions arise: Just how different were these two religious tropes, Brahmanism and Hinduism? How unaware were the people in one area of the Subcontinent of their contemporaries in other parts of South Asia? Is an ancientness orientation necessarily a colonial construct or was there a clearly evident, if nascent Hindu identity extant in Indic civilization prior to and during the “Golden Age of Indian Civilization”? Did this self-identity occur, then, centuries before the Turks named it and the English categorized and reified it? Was there a prior existing mutual historical recognition of a common “Dharmic” identity among the peoples who lived in the ancient Subcontinent?

The Puranic-based foundation and structure of historiography is inescapable and inextricable.

Ron Inden writes, “All agents are relatively complex and shifting. They make and remake one another through dialectic process in changing situations.” David Sopher, in “The Geographic Patterning of Culture in India,” makes the case for a highly mobile society in early India in which people and ideas moved across “core areas.” This fluidity and overlapping of peoples, languages and ideas, created a backdrop, Bharatvarsha, where the agency of the subject was in a continual process of being “completed, contested and remade.”

This post-modernistic, occi-centric tropism theory takes the stance that a backdrop of commonalities did not exist on an ascriptive vital level nor, less metaphysically, on a

geographic level. However I would argue that the tradition of pilgrimage, which is well documented in classical Indian/Hindu literature, ties the extremities of the subcontinent together from Kanya Kumari on the southern-most tip of India to Amarnath in the frozen caves of the high Himalayas in Kashmir. “From Orissa to Sindh, these bonds of pilgrimage, between places known to Hindus since time immemorial, create a geographical entity that is not only sacred, but can be located on a modern geo-political map.”

Voice and Agency in the Land of Liminal Puranic Identities

How does this ancientness theory correspond to the perceptions that “India has no history”? According to Raman Srinivasan, in India, the Puranic-based

foundation and structure of historiography is inescapable and inextricable. In 2001, I asked Srinivasan what he thought about the infamous emergence of the neo-Hindu agent in the modern world and particularly his views of the controversial “history wars” being fought in the newspapers and the halls of academia. This well discussed academic battle concerns the efforts by the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) to not only rewrite school history textbooks but to explore, reinterpret and redefine India’s impact on world culture and the role she has played, and which she is denied, in the usual narration of world history, Sriniv responded,

The RSS has had a history rewriting project for many, many years. They do believe that history needs to be rewritten, and I suppose quite rightly. British historiography of India was a tool of the colonization of the Indian mind and the Indian nation. So to that

extent it needs to be rewritten [...] Definitely there is a strong desire to recast Indian History in a more positive way so that I suppose school boys learning history feel more proud and more confident in their tradition... to some extent it is a delayed reaction to the British writing of history.

I asked if he was referring to the John Stuart Mill, Vincent Smith, Kathryn Mayo models, and he explained,

If you look at late 18c early 19c accounts, quasi-ethnographic accounts of the scientific technological astronomical, mathematical traditions of India, when the British were hiring a large number of Brahmins and having them transcribing and documenting all these traditions, you will feel that the British are freaked out, they are absolutely freaked out by the possibility that these Brahmins or the Indian tradition could

comprehend any of these things they were reading. That was when they still believed that the earth was created in four thousand five hundred B.C., so when the Hindu Brahman astronomer said that according to us the Kali Yuga goes back to this such and a date, they just completely freaked out. And there is evidence of the British suppressing a lot of it and distorting it. Even in the question of chronology in Indian history you will find the early British historians completely unwilling to even acknowledge that anything could be older than 4,500 B.C. So I suppose the rewriting of history is sort of a delayed reaction to that kind of distortion. Once again the question of what is the nature of history in India and Indian society and what are the uses of it. But one wonders why the hell should history have become such a controversial subject?

Because Indians really don't care about history we are the most ahistoric people.

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I asked Srinivasan if that wasn't shortchanging a tradition by delimiting the field of history within the boundaries and formats formulated through a linear, formal modern approach, ignoring the vast oral kahani traditions and the puranas. Srinivasan responded,

That is an interesting question. Existentially, philosophically, anthropologically, how do Indians experience history, or historical knowledge? Once again the clearest answers come from Raja Rao, read the preface to the Gandhi biography and also the whole *Serpent and the Rope* where his basic assertion is that India has no history. It is

very important to go deeply into that, to understand the assertion that India has no history.

I commented that scholars have to be careful when using predetermined terms like historical and ahistorical, or nation or nationalism because in the context of India they can mean something very different.

Srini pointed out that Raja Rao's understanding of history might shine light on the current history rewriting controversy,

Raja Rao says India has no history, what he means is that the goal in India has always been transcendence of time and space so when you transcend time there is no history, when you kill time there is no history. He wrote a sentence that "time is flamed like camphor in a temple" and of course we have Shiva as Kala Sambhairava, the destroyer of time. Read Mircea Eliade, on time and

eternity, he said Western man has always struggled with this terror of time. You are terrified that you are going to die and so history is intimately associated with notions of death and birth. History becomes important if you believe in death so it is really fundamentally a philosophical question. If you don't believe in death, history is irrelevant. Why bother with history when there is no death? India has for several millennia not bothered with history in that sense because we have known transcendence. There is no need to be bothered with history unlike China where you bury your ancestors in your kitchen. Here, we burn the body, the tangible record of the past. Once you die, you're burned. You don't care about history and so it becomes interesting to ask why the hell are these Hindutva people worried about history? I mean, I can understand if the

Marxists are interested in history because Marx is very much limited by time. That crowd thinks that history is so important because it is the road to the future; the future paradise lies in not repeating the mistakes of history and all that crap. The development-valas, Walter Rostow and the whole fifties development brigade was just another facet of Marxist thought. In their stages of development, India is an underdeveloped country and one day it will become overdeveloped, all that kind of nonsense. But to use Raja Rao's analogy, that's a horizontal way of thinking and India has never thought of itself as that. They have always gone vertically and you transcend time and space, and none of this is relevant.

So is this need to use history to validate the Indian identity an example of what has been called, the “semiticization of Hinduism”. . . wherein they want to justify or glorify

Hinduism within a particular time frame in question?

When we say that India has no history what we mean by that is Indian history has always been shaped by anonymous forces or nameless people, that is people who have conquered their egos. It is not a history of egos, so how can you have a history of the namelessness of the anonymous principal—that is the sage? Throughout history, throughout the millennia, Indian society has been animated by silence and the sage. And if you accept that, then I don't see any problem.

History becomes important if you believe in death so it is really fundamentally a philosophical question.

I told Srini I was hesitant to accept an assertion that forces the historical past in the Indian milieu into a cultural framework or

straightjacket that effectively renders it unnecessary or unapproachable. I asked him if the ahistorical Puranic past, prolifically situated in India's cyclical time, was capable of coming together with India's needs as a modern nation and history as a discipline? Srini answered, "I don't think they are antithetical that is one of the things I have struggled with and tried to write about. How do you write the history of India when there is no history?" I suggested that historians of India have to write through the oxymoron, embrace the paradox of an ahistorical history. Srini alluded to several of Raja Rao's books, and then said, "In India, you can't write history, you write Purana."

I asserted that all histories are a Purana of one type or another, all history is reconstructed, and they are all eventually deconstructed and recreated again and again.

I wondered if the history of historiography in the West wasn't a reflection of the famous story about Indra's ants, where characters and events repeat themselves over and over again through time... historical narratives are circular and fluid. Srinivasan commented,

That is where the leftists have been lacking in the debate on this in India. The Indian leftists have been so damn backward . . . if you read the current debates on American historiography or Western historiography, history is a fantasy. History is fiction, it is just a particular kind of fiction bounded by certain conventions just as murder mysteries are bound by certain conventions or science fiction. History is fictive, it is the Purana. It is just a particular kind of Purana one that comes from a particular American tradition. This notion of objectivity in history, that there is a scientific history that Marxists are

so fond of, is itself a fiction. Unfortunately the Indian Marxists haven't really kept up with that research. History is also socially constructed and the conventions of historiography are socially constructed.

The contemporary Indian subject is a complex construction, a product of multiple interactive forces of overlapping intertwining cultures— an amalgam of the modern/post-modern/post-traditional human experience. By nature these forces are fluid and liminal, defy definition and are difficult to identify. There are numerous agreed upon strategies and theoretical schools of thought that have developed for the study of Indian history and culture.

Theories that Agonize Over India

To sketch a background of the field, in which to plant several arguments for a pre-

Islamic Hindu identity, I will present a discussion of the theoretical models that constitute the main methodological approaches used by Indologists. For convenience, I will list these according to the categories constructed by Gerald Larson, who defines four theoretical orientations currently employed in South Asian Studies. Though Larson's categories are conveniently overly simplistic and by necessity overlapping, I borrow his framework in order to examine particulars of each historiographical perspective.

The Modernizing-Secularization Theory is represented by the work of liberal social scientists such as Durkheim and Weber and a long list of scholars including Habermas, neo-Hegelian historians and the Frankfort School—a diverse group, who all share, according to Larson, the idea that modernization leads to the secular

“disenchantment of the world.” These idealists envisioned a process of progress, culminating in a rational, just society.

Modernization is predicated by a certain liberal, scientific orientation centered on capitalism and/or democratic socialism that can lead less developed, more traditional societies, on a “trajectory of future-oriented development.” This is a visionary category, dialectical and linear. Larson places Nehru and Gandhi in this category. Though the broad range of scholarship subsumed under this heading is questionable, the origins are decidedly in the Post-Enlightenment empiricist/humanist/positivist school.

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The history of European historiography is briefly but amply described in *History and the Historians*, by Mark Gilderhus. Post-Enlightenment mathematics and natural science “had removed the aura of mystery from nature, had freed enquiry from the obfuscation of medieval obscurantism, and it was thought that the same tool would be similarly successful in the study of man.”

In his description of “Indology as Natural Science,” Inden enumerates nine characteristics of “classical natural scientific thinking [which] cause difficulty for the idea of human agency.” The list includes all the tools of the Post-Enlightenment social scientists: India can be objectively studied; it is a unified entity; it is bounded and “insoluble from any other systems;” it is atomist; it is complete—no additions or subtractions are possible; it is self-centered—“a directing center and directed periphery;”

self-regulating; determinist—it follows universal laws; and it is essentialist. In his detailed analysis, Inden's discussion of the evolution of the social sciences makes subtle distinctions between schools of thought.

Voltaire, who in many ways personifies of the Enlightenment, considered religion to be an “impediment to human progress”. He “ranked the priestly classes . . . among the. . . purveyors of bigotry, intolerance, and oppression.” Robin G. Collingwood characterized the Enlightenment as an attempt to “secularize every department of human life and thought . . . a revolt not only against the power of institutional religion but against religion itself.” These philosophies tended to see religiosity as superstitious and irrational.

Subsequently, many Post-Enlightenment scholars, such as Hegel and Max Müller,

stressed the metaphysical, the hand of God, in their philosophical systems. Müller sought to find justification in the scientific method for the newly formulated science of philology. Hegel is known for the dialectical method—thesis, antithesis, synthesis—which sought to comprehend all knowledge within a single system. Absolute Reason or Mind, *Weltgeist* “manifests itself in both natural and human history.” Hegel’s view of history and of the state ultimately developed into competing left-wing and right-wing political theories. Karl Marx, most prominently, turned the dialectic of *Weltgeist* into a dialectic of materialism. Both sides, nonetheless, stressed the idea of a unified state and thus contributed directly to the growth of nationalism.

European philosophers, a contradictory mix of opposing ontological/teleological

orientations, “proclaimed the advent of a new age of advancement for humankind in which the faculty of reason would end ignorance and superstition and govern the conduct of human behavior.” As we examine the development of Post-Enlightenment rational theory and its application in the creation of the sovereign subject of the Indian “Other” in Indological studies, we can ask: To what degree did all the Euro-centric theorizing and philosophizing influence either the self-concept of the Brahman in eighteenth and nineteenth century India or the “community identity” of his subaltern counterpart? Ravinder Kumar notes that Historical scholarship inevitably reflects national viewpoints and national aspirations. There is little reason to believe that scholars within a national polity necessarily agree with each other on

questions of focus and interpretation. Even the differences in perception within a national scholarly community belong to a common universe of discourse. Historical explanations offered by scholars drawn from different countries seldom lead to conclusions which offer a common ground for a dialogue.

In Gerald Larson's second category, Orientalist Theory, he includes "the traditions of humanistic scholarship as they pertain to non-Western traditions, including philology, archaeology and art history, ancient history, language and literature, history of religions, and the "great area specializations" such as Middle Eastern Studies, Sinology, Indology. The Modernizing-Secularization Theory leads humankind away from the dark ages and chaos of the distant past in a trajectory of future-oriented development, whereas the

Orientalists focus in the opposite direction. Orientalists opined that the classical core of civilization, especially among the Hindus, had degenerated over time. The wonder that was ancient India held secrets for reviving and revitalizing Hindu society.

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This resurgence of India's historic greatness was a project of the Nationalists, who perceived the recovery of India's ancient roots as the source of her future power. Gandhi envisioned the return of Rama Rajya, a time when Dharma will once again guide the political activities of humans. One school of Orientalists, the Utilitarians, sought to get India back on the civilizing track by introducing the products

of the Enlightenment, which had ironically flowered from the very same Indo-European roots “discovered” in India’s past. Orientalists sought to locate “essentialist formulations [of the] world’s great non-Western civilizations and religions” examining primarily “textual, art historical and archaeological sources.” Edward Said described Orientalism as a projection designed:

...to restore a region from its present barbarism to its former classical greatness; to instruct (for its own benefit) the Orient in the ways of the modern West; . . . to formulate the Orient, to give it shape, identity, definition with full recognition of its place in memory, its importance to imperial strategy, and its ‘natural’ role as an appendage of Europe; . . . and above all, to transmute living reality into the stuff of texts.

The Post-Orientalist critique perceives European scholarship of Asia to be mutually constitutive with the strategies of colonial domination, and implicated in perpetrating unequal power relations through the discursive practice of creating pairs of contrasting dyads, such as civilized/primitive, traditional/modern, classical/corrupt, rational/superstitious. As Inden states, “Studies of India employed the presuppositions and assumptions of empiricism and its supposed opposite, idealism, to constitute their object.”

Larson’s third category, World System Theory, is based on early Marxist constructs and “stresses a holistic, systemic approach.” Economic causality underlies all religious and social movements. Larson finds it ironic that this type of Marxist analysis persists among a large portion of contemporary Indian intellectuals even

though Marx's ideas have proven inapplicable in India.

The ground-breaking Subaltern Project attempted to "break free of . . . 'elite historiography'." Subalternists perused official histories, reading against the text, to locate the "concrete and particular historic struggles of the 'subaltern' masses." They proposed a fragmentary state and spoke of the "failure of the nation to come into its own". They examined micro-level issues in order to uncover the intentions of the unchronicled groups and individuals who interacted behind the scenes of elite accounts. Though the Subalternists would call all three of the previous theoretical models into question, Larson points out that since "it is intellectually derivative from post-modernist and post-structuralist western 'critical theory' . . . [the Subaltern project] thereby runs the risk of being more

no than a kind of Neo-Orientalist theorizing”.

The last category Larson calls Towards a “Religionization” Theory. He argues that a “religious studies perspective” that focuses on the “high salience of religious experience” is useful in understanding the relationship between “religion” and the “state” in India, especially since the other theories see religion “in terms of its manifestation in historical, social, economic and political contexts.” Larson argues that religious expression should also be seen “in terms of its substantive content. . . its basic intellectual and spiritual claims”. This final category caps this summary of Larson’s theories of historiography, though it is only an example of the many ways to study India and doesn’t prevent the existence of or preclude the validity of theories that arise from other schools of thought. A

Religionization Theory leads to answers that can help to problematize the discourse that denies commonalities of religious experience in pre-Islamic India.

The motivation often given for this academic denial of an “ancientness approach” is that it was a fabricated by Orientalists, nurtured by Indian Nationalists, and in the continuing cultural context, has been politically abused by the contemporary Hindu resurgence movement. These dreaded “Hindu Nationalists” and other contemporary Indic-centric voices would be denied agency by this methodology if it could be shown that there were no Hindus in ancient India.

Pushing the Puranic Paradigm: Contesting the Fragmentation

The Puranic tales, Burton Stein effectively argues, are a type of Indian historical record,

the importance of which “was noted by Kautalya in the Arthasasatra, Purana is regarded as ‘Itihaasa-veda’ and second in importance only to the four vedas.” The tales of the Puranas, whose early connection with the non-elite strata of society is well documented, were certainly not restricted to elites in the “Brahmanism trope” but were shared by many social groups in across vast regions. Ramdas Lamb notes that,

Indologists have traditionally concentrated on brahmanical Sanskritic texts when considering the concept of scripture in India. Perhaps as a result, the orthodox view of shruti and smriti has tended to neglect the modifications of these categories that have taken place over the last thousand years. Devotional movements have been largely responsible for the increasing permeability and reinterpretation of these categories. They have precipitated the

greatest number of additions to the class of smriti and at the same time have inspired the elevation of multiple sectarian works to the status of shruti.

Many popular stories and texts had reached a point of saturation across India and even into Indonesia during the ancient period.

Most notably among these are the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Sheldon Pollock's research has shown that "the discourse of the epic had already intersected with, or reprocessed, or perhaps even provided an idiom for, the ideologies of early Indian imperial polities, especially that of Ashoka." He continues, "For a thousand years from at least the fourth century A.D., the literary imagination of India received undiminished stimulation from the Rama legend, even to the point of hypertrophy." Pollock cites many locations across India including Nasik (ca A.D. 150),

which feature scenes from the Ramayana. Friezes “bearing Ramayana themes are found in rock-cut caves. . . in coastal Andhra. . . that may reach back to [the] fourth [or] fifth centuries A.D.

From the seventh century on, substantial interest in the Ramayana tale is attested, as in the Caluka temples. . . at Pattadakal, which are among the first to attempt any kind of systematic narration (some even provide identifying labels in Praakrit), or in the great frieze on the vimana of the. . . temple of Kailasanatha at Ellora, (A.D. 757-72). . . From around this period individual scenes also begin to appear in the east and south of the subcontinent—in the seventh century. . . at Bhuhaneshwar, the eighth century. . . at Kañci and. . . at Mahaballipuram. . . [and including] the well-known Vishnu shrine at Deogarh (ca. A.D. 500)

According to Ramdas Lamb, the Ram story is first found in northern India pre-600 BCE. A.K. Ramanujan charts the external movements and internal changes in his article, “300 Ramayanas,” which not only mentions Valmiki’s germinal Sanskrit version, but discusses Jain, Buddhist, Tamil and Thai interpretations. When subsequent Ramayana texts use the plot of previous ones (Valmiki), “to say entirely new things, often in an effort to subvert the predecessor by producing a countertext,” Ramanujan calls such a translation symbolic.

The word translation here acquired a somewhat mathematical sense, a mapping of a structure of relations onto another plane or another symbolic system. When this happens, the Rama story has become almost a second language of the whole culture area, a shared core of names, characters, incidents, and motifs, with a narrative

language in which [the original text] can say one thing and [subsequent texts] something else, even the exact opposite.

These dreaded “Hindu Nationalists” and other contemporary Indic-centric voices would be denied agency by this methodology if it could be shown that there were no Hindus in ancient India.

Ramanujan points out that by the fourteenth century, “Kumaaravyasa, a Kannada poet, chose to write a Mahabharata, because he heard the cosmic serpent which upholds the earth groaning under the burden of Ramayana poets.”

This synthesis of folk religion with temple traditions can also be traced through the Krishna stories that appeared in northeast India earlier than 600 BCE. By the first centuries of the Common Era Krishna’s

impact in the south is well documented. Ramdas Lamb offers some examples,

The Alvars (c. 6-9 C.E.) express extreme devotion to Krishna, and to some extent to Ram. That Alvars were a low caste tells us that it was not just the brahmanical tradition to which Ram and Krishna had relevance, but the commoners as well. The Bhagavata Purana is a product of the South. It is most definitely a brahmanized version of the Krishna story, and thus shows us that Krishna devotion had become sufficiently important that the religious elite sought to co-opt it for their own purposes.

This point is central to the argument that borrowing between the various variants and multiple traditions of Hinduism went both ways. . . from Brahmanical to Prakrit and vice a versa.

What Gerald Larson calls, “India’s hybrid discourse of modernity” is the continuing expression of the evolving pre-modern pan-India religious ethos. There are numerous common elements within Indian religions that have continued since the earliest historical times. These include a belief in various concepts of karma, transmigration, non-violence, and the importance of the guru/disciple relationship. We find all of these in Buddhism, Jainism, and multiple schools of Hinduism including Sikhism. Certain themes clearly connect and weave through all of these traditions.

“The Nayannars, a fifth to seventh century movement of Shiva bhaktas in the south show us that Shiva had also become an integral part of the evolving pan-India religious ethos.” The interchangeable and dynamic nature of these ideas, precludes their essentialization. They are not static nor

reified. There are many historical developments that show the pervasiveness of “Hindu” concepts and deities throughout much of the Subcontinent. At the same time, each area has had its own unique beliefs and practices. Hinduism is inherently diverse, while having multiple commonalities.

In the 20th century, post-modernism eviscerated whole schools of thought. The standing methodologies of fields such as anthropology and sociology were debated and discarded. In this post-modern milieu, the study of India metamorphosed into an intensely reflective examination of academic assumptions. Through this process, a disheveled India was combed for reified essentialisms that were carefully disentangled from her tousled locks and tossed aside like ideological nits. Indic Civilization itself was denied as a “colonial

construct” and deconstructed into unrelated tropes or fragments. India became intangible, demoted from a cultural historical entity to merely an idea—discursively displaced by her own civilizational discourse. Hinduism, also dismissed as an invention of the Islamic or colonial interface, became a mere religious hypothesis, more a “way of life” than a spiritual tradition. Delinked from its spiritual moorings, “Hindu” became an academic code word for intolerance.

India’s germs and warts, chiseled from her matrix with the tools of critical theory, were elevated as the norm. Wrapping her up in millennial pathologies, scholars predicted India’s demise, while claiming she never existed. However, like a vaccinated patient, the India entering into the 21st century is a contemporary re-creation of Hinduism’s dynamic penchant for absorptive hybridity.

In this context, India is a self-conscious post-traditional society—not post-modern—reconstituting a fractured identity, taking back the discursive discourse in terms of her own legitimizing cannons.

In the 20th century, post-modernism eviscerated whole schools of thought.

European Genesis of the Gentoo

The argument that Hinduism is a colonial construct (or perhaps a Brahmanical conspiracy!) creates a fascinating oxymoron. “All religions are constructed, or rather are constantly under construction. . . [M]uch has happened to Hinduism in the past two centuries, tending toward greater homogenization of certain ideologies and practices, but this does not negate the long history of shared beliefs and practices among vast numbers of South Asians.” Indian history and culture cannot be studied

without a consideration of the spiritual/religious aspects. Theories that exclude the metaphysical from the mundane, fail to understand India; conversely the far end of the Orientalist paradigm would exclude the mundane from the main of Indology.

Critiquing this aspect of Orientalism is justified, but it seems to have been taken a step beyond. After restoring the mundane and repopulating the plains and hills with villages and commoners and subalterns, their religiosity is systematically denied. In India, even social/political/economic analyses require a treatment that considers religious overlays. Certainly, all medieval societies were religious, but India still is.

The westerners who looked at India in the 18th and 19th centuries were simply seeing what they needed to see in order to promote

their own agendas. When the westernized Bengali urban intellectuals, from Ram Mohan Roy on, sought to revise the distorted view of India that the Western writers had created, they distorted it in their own way. In the entire process, India was rarely presented for what it was, but what it was supposed to be in the eyes of various intellectuals, reformers, and historians.

Even the subaltern writers, though using a refreshing approach, have very clear agendas, and a critique of Indian history is a vehicle for them to advance that subaltern agenda. For decades after independence, Indian Marxists replaced orthodox Brahmins, which were replaced by colonial administrators as the new theoretical revisers of India history. The agenda has changed, but the game is the same—the imperatives of Marxist teleology have replaced colonial

trajectories that replaced Dharmic imperatives.

India's germs and warts, chiseled from her matrix with the tools of critical theory, were elevated as the norm. Wrapping her up in millennial pathologies, scholars predicted India's demise, while claiming she never existed.

All this brings us back to Indian historiography and the application of culturally loaded terms. Perhaps because most contemporary academic exercises are constructed with the assumption of a secular domain, discourses of social or economic theory can only inadequately describe the multi-layered, overtly religious mosaic that is Indic civilization, where no single tile provides an ultimately defining criterion.

This metaphor of the multi-textural, multi-hued mosaic, in which each distinct chip

contributes to the overall creation but, without which, the image is still complete, can perhaps capture the complex relations that details and fragments of the Indian mosaic express. Since India is still an “enchanted” land, the categorization of specifically “secular” elements in the socio-political sphere, can only find definition subsumed within the “Dharmic.” It is this all-inclusive, spiritually-centered system at work, this mosaic of multiplicity, diversity and longevity that creates paradoxes and oxymorons in almost any cultural analysis of India.

Paradigms and academic discourses consistently fall short when circumambulating Indic civilization. Social theories that compartmentalize, categorize, and extrapolate macrocosms out of microcosms, often encapsulate and encode cultural components creating a disassociated

cacophony. If discourses on Indian culture do not acknowledge the entirety of the mosaic, if they isolate and elevate the obscure detail out of context, they have only epitomized the enigmatic, while obfuscating the pattern. Hinduism or Indic civilization can be theorized into meaninglessness by dissecting it into disconnected parts that, though infused with abstractly Indian qualities, overlook the connective material, the ubiquitous matrix that binds together the fragments.

Occi-centric codifications and classifications of their religious expressions, did not, of course, create a static experience for the practitioners, nor cause Hindu culture to cease moving though time, ancient and modern, as it gathers, assimilates, rejects and dispenses influences ideas. This dynamic aspect of Hinduism accesses a cultural plasticity, allowing absorption and

assimilation of external and internal forces, without loosening the matrix. This Hinduism, an assortment of various traditions, sometimes overlapping, sometimes oppositional preexisted Eurocentric historiography.

There is at the core a basic difference in the orientation towards historiography. In the West, we see our ancient past as something alien, to be studied as “isolated projects”. Enlightenment and Post-Enlightenment scholars saw the past as primitive and irrational, “as something from which to escape, in Collingwood’s words, [as] ‘sheer terror [and] devoid of all positive value whatever.’ When gauged against the standards of the present, it failed to measure up.” In the West, “when the past is presented in chronological order, it is prioritized [and] only the post-Renaissance past appears relevant to the present; the

earlier past is presented. . . as an object of curiosity.” The Indian perception towards history is diametrically different. “The ancient and medieval periods are presented in a manner which ensures that they carry the same aura of relevance to the present as the modern period does. [....] The message of an underlying continuity is explicit. . . and imparts to the nation-state a civilizational heritage which is historically continuous.”

Acknowledging the danger of using metaphors to describe India, I opt to employ two of them to describe the methodologies of modern scholars. First, the well known story of the blind men, who from different directions, attempt to identify the elephant, examining only a fragmented selection. . . with predictable diverse results. And secondly, the story of Shankaracharya’s disciple who thought he saw a snake that

turned out to be a rope. Shankaracharya said that for him, at that moment, it was a snake. So, too the theoretical constructs that scholars use in the study of India, seem genuinely formed, yet how many different snakes can appear in the multiple Indian realities?

In closing, I would like to point out, for practical purposes, that in Sanskrit, the terms for the points of the compass assume that the viewer is facing east—Purva (before: East) and therefore Dakshina (right: south); Uttara (high: north) and Paschima (West). This reoriented map, then, suggests that we must be able to see things differently, to adopt a different world-view, face East so to speak, if we wish to enter sympathetically into an understanding of ancient and medieval or modern India.

In the late twentieth century there is no civilization that is not elastic and plastic and liminal at the edges existing amid myriad simultaneous stimuli, foreign and domestic, ancient and modern. The student need not have read Foucault or Derrida to know that time and again the center shifts and history takes another course— or should we say, discourse? Multi-dimensional, omni-perspectival multiculturalism is inherent and integral in today's world, East and West. The media and other influences have telescoped time. India, exists in a reality in which she can recreate herself again and again.

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from its people and institutions.” Inden claims that this reified view has been created by scholars who thought of India as “eternally ancient by various Essences attributed to it, most notably caste.” This magus opus covers a plethora of topics as Inden uses the tools of the post-modernist post-orientalist critique to analyze seemingly every facet of Indian society and history and particularly, Hinduism.

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universalism of the Gandhian nationalist ideology together with its demythologized Nehruvian variant in terms of ‘socialism,’ ‘secularism,’ control of the ‘commanding heights,’ a strong Centre and ‘non-alignment,’ along with the liberal democratic traditions of the Indian National Congress, the reformist impulses of such Neo-Hindu religious movements as the Brahmo Samaj, the Arya Samaj, the Ramakrishna Mission and even to some degree the Hindu Mahasabha, and all of this with a quasi-Protestant veneer of individualism and the privatization of religious belief.” He places India’s agony over religion within the context of this “multi-layered cultural heritage.”

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Asia,” South Asia, Vol. XVII, no. 1 (1994), pp. 1-23. Ludden employs his usually articulate and erudite scholarly tools to bear upon the concept of “civilization.” He states that “Cultural studies seems to have deflected attention away from the task of understanding how the idea of civilization affects historical thinking.” Modern scholars, including the Subalternists, are “committed to an all embracing dichotomy between Indian and Europe” and “Indian civilization . . . is defined inside this opposition.” Ludden argues that the “idea of civilization radically distorts social and cultural space, making South Asia seem closed and sedentary when it is open and mobile.” I would argue, however, that it is the nature and results of mobility that created “Indic Civilization,” allowing for the free exchange of ideas and symbols to create a conceptual association among the diverse

elements that make up the many fragments of “Indic Civilization.” Ludden argues that modern national cultures have a stake in the appropriation of “civilizational boundaries.” However, I would object that just because something has been appropriated as a modern political justification, doesn’t retroactively nullify its pre-modern existence, without the familiar labels. He also argues that there were far too many interactions between ancient India and other parts of Eurasia to isolate them within a civilizational conceptual space. He succinctly states his thesis, “The civilization idea fractures and immobilizes history. It is a weapon that competing nationalisms use to control history. So history needs to disentangle itself from the imagined communities of modernity to gain leverage on disputes about national identities today. Outside civilization, history can look

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feature of Indian society—its religious bigotry and its fundamentally irrational character—[. . .] Like tribalism and factionalism, communalism is given, endemic, inborn. Like them, it denies consciousness and agency to the subjected peoples of the colonized world. ‘History’ happens to these people; it can hardly be a process in which they play a conscious and significant part.” In contrast he states, “The nationalists [. . .] recognize communalism as a problem of recent origins, as the outcome basically of economic and political inequality and conflict, as the handiwork of a handful of self-interested elite-groups (colonial and native), with the mass of the people being essentially ‘secular.’” He does however explain that “the colonialist and the nationalist readings of communalism make unexpected appearances in each other’s discourses. . . .” By looking at particular

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leads him to an equally interesting examination of forms of pre-colonial “orientalist constructions” found in the power relations of “the various systematized and totalized constructions of inequality in traditional India.” By problematizing traditional indigenous form of Sanskritized knowledge production, Pollock uses the tools of the Orientalist critique and applies them not only to the Nazi appropriation of Indology, but looks beyond the obvious to create “components of a critical Indology that confronts domination in both the scholarly process and the scholarly subject.” His treatment of the “luxurious efflorescence of scholarly production” of Dharmashastra commentaries produced during the ninth through the early fourteenth century, is of particular interest.

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Sircar, D.C. *The Shakta Pithas*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsi Dass, 1973. Though most of the text is in Sanskrit, the commentary and introduction describe the fifty-one tirtas, or pilgrimage sites “associated with the Mother Goddess under some of her various names.” Tantric literature is used to understand ancient and medieval Indian geography and religious life.

Sopher, David. “The Geographic Patterning of Culture in India,” *An Exploration of India*. Ithica: Cornell University Press,

1980. This interesting article recasts India's regional "functional" geography model of stable, homogeneous culture zones in a larger context of dynamic circulation of peoples and ideas. With an emphasis on "cultural flow" the author has focused on "the paths of religious movements, the loci of literacy and artistic ferment, the diffusion of technology, the migration of people." Ironically, he utilizes the concept of core areas to undergrid his argument of cultural diffusion. His arguments are nonetheless strong as he divides and dissects ancient and medieval India into different overlapping dichotomous schematic models through which the perennial migrations of groups of people and ideas flowed through the millennia. Though he offers strong evidence for the differentiation of India into slices such as North/South or East/West, his object is to emphasize continual and

extensive cultural diffusion along the paths of geographical least resistance.

Stein, Burton. *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980. One of the seminal works on the political culture of Medieval South India. He explores the economic and political relationships of the seemingly stable South India agrarian society to the centers of power. He throws aside many old concepts such as Oriental Despotism, and by explaining alternative models in great detail, he attempts to disprove long accepted paradigms such as centralized bureaucracy. His theory rests on the segmentary state model which operated in varying degrees within a region of geographic and linguistic variety.

—“Early Indian Historiography: A Conspiracy Hypothesis,” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 6 (1969). An interesting look at the presumed “ahistorical” nature of ancient and medieval India. He argues that it is not simply the sheer volume of the Puranic tradition that gives it importance in the study of ancient and medieval India, but their historical intention. “The importance of the Puranas was noted by Kautalya in the Arthashastra, purana is regarded as “Itihaasa-veda,” and second in importance only to the four vedas.” Within these texts are long list of dynastic genealogical information, passed down, modified and reinterpreted for almost a millennium. Included as well are charitas of famous kings and holy men. However, the Puranas were not “fixed” textually until approximately the eighth century. Because of the mythological and heavily symbolic

nature of the material, their use as historical documents is considered limited. Stein makes an exception for the *Kashmir Chronicle*, *RaajataraNginii*, of Kalhana from the twelfth century. It is interesting to note that Kalhana used extant texts, inscriptions and oral traditions in order to “establish the true account of kings and events in contrast to vague and conflicting tradition.”

Talbot, Cynthia. “Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self: Hindu-Muslim Identities in Pre-Colonial India,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, (1995). In order to look at “Hindu-Muslim interactions in medieval India” and to “recover the history of their mutual and self-perceptions,” Talbot focuses on epigraphical records in a region in Andhra Pradesh from 1323 to 1650 C.E. She traces

the growing references of the Muslims as the “demonic other” as well refutes the claim that the two societies, Hindu and Muslim never peacefully co-existed. Times of particular threat or violence, such as the onslaught of the Delhi Sultanate between 1296 and 1325, which induced a “magnitude of sociopolitical upheavals” caused by the Muslim conquest in peninsular India, are “reflected in the tone of Andhra inscriptions issued soon thereafter.”

Thapar, Romila. “Communalism and the Writing of Ancient Indian History,” *Communalism and the Writing of Indian History*, Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1969. Thapar traces the Orientalist/Indologists, Utilitarian and Nationalist threads of historical method, analyzing their motivations and political

orientations. Her discussion covers such topics as the eventual construction of the “Turkic Other” by Hindus, the relationship of “historical interpretation [as] integrally related to a people’s notion of its culture and nationality,” and the “propagation of the Hindu interpretation of Indian history.” She argues that the essentialist category of India as a nonviolent society that “could not withstand the invaders from the north-west” is not substantiated by the records of “early Indian history” and such heroes as Chandragupta Maurya, Kanishka [. . .] Harsha [and] Rajendra Chola, [who were] conquerors.”

Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity,” Modern Asian Studies, Cambridge University Press: 1989. Though arguing for a discontinuity between Brahmanism and Hinduism she states that there were many

mutually receptive interactions and influences involved in the “acculturation between brahmanic ‘high culture’ and the ‘low culture’ of local cults.”